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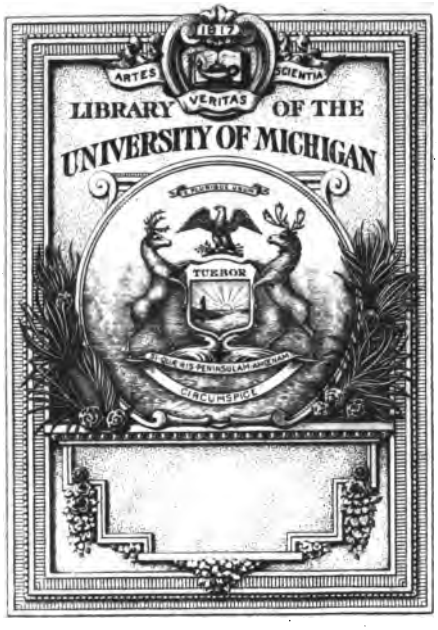

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WILLIAM MORRIS

AN APPRECIATION

BY

JAMES MORTON
Of Darvel, Ayrshire

As read before the XL Club, Glasgow
March 4th, 1901

LONDON
PRINTED AT THE CHISWICK PRESS
1901

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WILLIAM MORRIS

The causes were many and varied which led to the dissolution of Feudalism in Europe, and though from this distance we can see its faults and limitations, there is no gainsaying the fact that, under that system of government, there lived for several centuries a people as contented, as able, and, in many respects, as noble, as any of which history bears record. Its fundamental theory was "an unbroken chain of service from the serf up to the Kaiser, and of protection from the Kaiser down to the serf." There was no system of exchange such as we know it, for in its true conception the serf and all he had belonged to the feudal lord, while he in his turn, with all his serfs, was at the call of the king, to fight and work as he pleased. Much strife there doubtless was, and bloody times enough, but that there was all through those centuries a freedom and a certain bold and wholesome pleasure in life, we have every evidence. Chaucer of the period, and our own Scott,

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larger in every way, we find that at this very period the working class or proletariate, the descendants, that is, of those serfs from whom the now powerful Middle Class had grown, the remarkable thing, I say, is that this very period should be the lowest in their whole history. At the close of the Middle Ages, with mutton and beef at ¼*d.* per pound, wheat 4*s.* per quarter, and his 6*d.* a day, the serf and artisan, by ten weeks' ordinary work, could provision his household for a year, and was on the whole a tolerably jolly fellow. At the beginning of this century, notwithstanding the enormous multiplication of every commodity, his descendants found mutton and beef 7½*d.* per pound, wheat 100*s.* a quarter, and his wage 1*s.* 4*d.* to 1*s.* 8*d.* a day, so that, even with a twelve or fourteen hours' work-day all the year round, hunger was hard to drive from the door, and it is, I believe, a fact in social history, that at no period had the working man been so poor or his life so pleasureless. How miserable was his lot at that time, how harassed and overtaxed, may be gleaned from the history which hangs around the Factory Acts and such other crumbs of privilege as the Chartist and like movements extracted from parliament. And the surroundings too had been completely altered from the time of the country serf, for commercialism had seen the growth of modern industrial cities, the meagre and monotonous housing of the work-

man, with the sordidness and squalor which inevitably follow.

Such was the condition of life during the early years of the nineteenth century, such was the England on which John Ruskin first looked with that clear eye and sensitive temperament, and to which he ventured to offer his gospel of "Modern Painters" and "Stones of Venice." Such, a little later, was the England which young Morris saw from his student's window at Oxford, through those dreamy, distant eyes that saw and hoped so much. But we must not anticipate. We must learn of what stuff this young student is made of whom we mean to speak, and whom, I dare say, you think I have been rather tardy in introducing.

William Morris had been born in 1834 at Walthamstow in Essex, and was the only son of William Morris, a Discount Broker, who had come to London a young man of twenty from Worcester, and had worked his way into a position of considerable affluence. The Morrises were of Welsh descent, and their ancestors had lived for generations in a quiet valley on the upper Severn, leaving nothing noteworthy to chronicle. His mother was a Sheldon of Worcester, a family with a history dating back to Henry VII., who had landed estates and supplied many members of the Bar and Church. He appears to have been delicate in infancy and early childhood, for his

mother tells us he had to be kept alive on calves' feet jelly and beef tea, but a glowing testimonial is due to these diets (or perhaps to the mother's care), for the delicate child cast his ailments early from him, and grew through healthy youth into a most robust and vigorous manhood. "Topsy" was a pet name given to him by his earliest companions, and one which stuck to him throughout his life, from the remarkable strength and unkemptness of his thick hair, which indeed must have been phenomenal,—in after years he used to amuse his children by lifting them up while they caught hold of the dark curly locks. His general physical strength and vitality were altogether exceptional. He could lift the heaviest weight in his teeth with apparent ease, and once, when describing how he had seen passengers staggering off the channel steamer laden with luggage, he illustrated his point to the amazement and horror of the audience by getting a chair under each arm, and then stooping and lifting the coal-scuttle in his teeth. In later days he was known in London by his broad, full figure dressed always in suit of blue serge, blue cotton shirt, with large soft hat on his massive head; and "by his rocking walk and breezy ruddy complexion had quite the cast of a Baltic sea captain." His temper too was hot and passionate (in a letter at an early period his fellow-lodger wrote, "Topsy has

broken only one window to-day"), and he had "the unceasing restlessness of a wild creature." Even at work or meals he could not sit still for long, but must be continually shifting and fidgeting, getting up to cross the room or look out of the window, and then sitting down again. This restless element was a necessity to him as a means of working off his great bodily strength and superabundant vitality. "And with this great physical strength," says his biographer, "went the gift of profound and almost dreamless sleep, taken, to use his own phrase, in solid bars. From this he awoke at the full height of his energy. Within ten minutes of waking in the morning he had dressed and begun the business of the day. He was often at work at his writing, or his designing, or his loom, by the summer sunrise; and in those undisturbed hours lay a great part of the secret of the immense copiousness of his production, both as a poet and as a decorative artist."

His delicate childhood, however, had been the means of his early taking to books. His sisters say they never remember his learning to read, and he himself could not remember a time when he could not read. By the age of four he was deep in the Waverley novels, and by seven he had read all and knew every one thoroughly, a circumstance which had a most marked effect on his after life. It was in this

way he became thoroughly saturated with the ways of the mediæval world. The leisurely life, the freshness and beauty of the surroundings both of nature and art, the charm of chivalry and romance, indeed the whole atmosphere of the Middle Ages he seemed to adopt as his own from that time forth. As a boy his most favourite pastime was to dress himself in a suit of armour and ride his pony round the park. He was a keen angler both in boyhood and throughout his life, and there was no bird or flower in the district around of which he did not know the names and habits. A bad speller at school, and never very clear about some words all his life, he did not appear as a brilliant scholar at Marlborough College, whither he went when he left his home tutor. But he was a keen collector of birds' eggs, made long walks with the boys, and interested them all the way by endless tales about knights and fairies, in which "one adventure rose out of another and the tale flowed on from day to day for a whole term." Also at this school he did a great amount of desultory reading, and knew all about English Gothic both from books and old buildings in the neighbourhood.

But his years at Oxford were more full of incident, and they gave direction to his after life. In 1853 Oxford was in its main aspects a mediæval city, and the name roused, in Morris's own words, "A vision of gray-roofed

houses and a long winding street, and the sound of many bells." For the regular class studies Morris had not much relish. He was not a brilliant performer in his classes, nor had he much good to say of them, but it was the atmosphere of the place, the feeling of the old town, and the association of youth, that made life for him at Oxford. Within a few days he had made the acquaintance of Burne-Jones, a freshman from Birmingham, and, like Morris, entered at Exeter College to prepare for Holy Orders. The friendship between the two was spontaneous and lasting. From that time onward, few weeks, even few days passed in which they were not together. Indeed the one life seemed to be complementary to the other, and it is impossible to conceive of a friendship more steady and lasting or more fruitful and beautiful in its results. Long years after Sir Edward Burne-Jones writes of those days, "From the first I knew how different he was from all the men I had ever met. He talked with vehemence and sometimes with violence; I never knew him languid or tired. He was slight in figure in those days; his hair was dark brown and very thick, his nose straight, his eyes hazel coloured, his mouth exceedingly delicate and beautiful. Before many weeks were passed in our first term there were but three or four men in the whole college whom we visited or spoke to. But

our common room was invariably Faulkner's, where, about nine in the evening, Morris and I would often stroll down together and settle once for all how all people should think." And again, after a vacation during which they had been separated, on the first night after Burne-Jones's arrival late from Birmingham,—"Presently Morris came tumbling in," he wrote home, "and talked incessantly for the next seven hours or longer." Of life at Oxford generally, and especially of the particular set with which Morris came to associate, the reminiscences of Canon Dixon, as given by Mr. Mackail in his life of Morris, are most vivid and interesting. After describing others of the set he continues, "At first Morris was regarded by the Pembroke men simply as a very pleasant boy. He was fond of talking, which he did in a husky shout, and fond of going down the river with Faulkner, who was a good boatman. He was very fond of sailing a boat. He was also extremely fond of single stick, and a good fencer. . . . In no long time, however, the great character of his nature began to impress us. His fire and impetuosity, great bodily strength and high temper, were soon manifested, and were sometimes astonishing, as, for example, his habit of beating his own head, dealing himself vigorous blows, to take it out of himself. I think it was he who brought in single stick; I remember him offering to teach

the cuts and guards. But his mental qualities, his intellect, also began to be perceived and acknowledged. I remember Faulkner remarking to me, 'How Morris seems to know things, doesn't he?' and it struck me that it was so. I observed how decisive he was, how accurate without any effort or formality; what an extraordinary power of observation lay at the base of many of his casual or incidental remarks, and how many things he knew that were quite out of the way, as, for example, Architecture. . . . But it was when Burne-Jones and he got at Ruskin," Canon Dixon continues, "that strong direction was given to a true vocation by 'The Seven Lamps,' 'Modern Painters,' and 'The Stones of Venice.' It was some little time before I and others could enter into this, but we soon saw the greatness and importance of it. He would often read Ruskin aloud; he had a mighty sounding voice, and chanted rather than read those weltering stanzas of eloquence, as they have never been given before or since, it is most certain."

Such was the atmosphere amid which Morris lived at Oxford, and not only did his relationship with them strengthen as time went on, but with most of the set the friendship was cordial and lifelong. His university days grew more active as they advanced, and Morris, with the rest, was full of those high hopes and aspirations which are inseparable from youth of such

temperament. At one time they had great plans for the formation of a Monastic Brotherhood, and Morris thought seriously of devoting the whole of his fortune to this end—his father had died some years previously leaving him the use of a fortune which yielded him £900 a year. This Anglo-Romish scheme, which was to lift them above the ordinary world, and included celibacy and conventual life, faded away as their sympathies widened, "and the actual knowledge of the inhuman condition of human life in the great industrial areas" brought to their circle by two of the set from the Black Country, changed the idea from a monastic to a social brotherhood. "Such surroundings," his biographer remarks, "impressed indelibly on those who lived in them the grand truth that all true freedom, all living art, all real morality, even among the limited class who are raised out of the common level by wealth or circumstances, finally depend upon the physical and social conditions of life which exist for the mass of their fellow-creatures. It was not long afterwards that this view of the matter took full hold of Morris, the country-bred boy, the easy liver and born aristocrat."

The set also inaugurated a Cambridge and Oxford University Magazine, which Morris had chiefly to do with, both during and for some time after his college days. In this magazine appeared those early prose romances which

possessed so fresh and peculiar a charm, and it was in those days too that he first discovered he could write poetry. The description of the incident is so interesting that I must quote it to you in Canon Dixon's words. "One night," he says, "Crom Price and I went to Exeter and found Morris with Burne-Jones. As soon as we entered the room Burne-Jones exclaimed wildly, 'He's a big poet!' 'Who is?' asked we. 'Why "Topsy"!' We sat down and heard Morris read his first poem, the first he had ever written in his life. It was called 'The Willow on the Red Cliff.' As he read it, I felt it was something the like of which had never been heard before. It was a thing entirely new, founded on nothing previous, perfectly original, whatever its value, and sounding truly striking and beautiful, extremely decisive and powerful in execution. I cannot recollect what took place afterwards, but I expressed my admiration in some way, as we all did, and I remember his remark, 'Well, if this is poetry, it is very easy to write.' From that time on for a term or two he came to my rooms almost every day with a new poem."

This poem, with many of those produced at the period, was burned after the publication of his first volume, and his biographer laments the loss as one never wholly to be replaced. Like the poems in "The Defence of Guinevere," he says, and in some cases even more strongly,

they appear to have had "that evanescent and intangible grace of a new beginning in art, the keen scent and frail beauty of the first blossoms of spring, which is more moving and more penetrating than even the full flower of mature summer." But in the midst of all this mass of work and other interests, Morris had been growing more and more in love with art, and in those days was a deep student of Gothic architecture and of mediæval art of all kinds. The long vacation of 1854 he had spent in Normandy and acquired his love for the old Dutch masters, visited all the old cathedrals of northern France, and brought back with him to Oxford photographs of Albert Dürer's engravings. Those were of immense interest to the set, but especially to himself and Burne-Jones, who had always shown remarkable talent for drawing (there was scarce a student of the class who did not possess one of Burne-Jones's devils), but who had come into contact with no work whatever of the Great Masters; indeed, so far were they out of the artist's atmosphere that he somewhere says he was two-and-twenty and had never met or even seen a painter. But they had drunk in all that Ruskin had written, they were alive to the aspirations of the Pre-Raphaelite Brethren, and worshipped from afar the mighty personality of Rossetti. The two grew more and more absorbed in art, and studies peculiar to Holy Orders had less and

less attraction for them. The vacation which they spent together in the north of France the summer following set the final seal on any waverings they might have. What impression had been made on Morris by his visit to the same district the year before, he tells us long years after in his lecture on "The Aims of Art." "Less than forty years ago," he says, "I first saw the city of Rouen, then still in its outward aspect a piece of the Middle Ages. No words can tell you how its mingled beauty, history and romance took hold of me. I could only say that, looking back on my past life, I find it is the greatest pleasure I ever had." And it was after months of feasting on the glories of the Gothic architecture as seen in northern France that Morris and Burne-Jones at last decided to devote their lives exclusively to art. "The careless freedom of the summer," says their biographer, "with the glories of the world lying all about the fair land among the sweet breath and colour of the fields, had broken down the last hesitations. Walking together on the quays of Havre late into the August night Morris and Burne-Jones at last took the definite decision to be artists, and abandon everything else in this world to art. It was decided that night that neither should proceed to take Orders, that the Oxford life should be wound up as quickly as possible, and that thereafter Burne-Jones should be a painter and Morris an archi-

tect." How much the resolution meant to the world we all know. From that moment to the end of his long life Burne-Jones gave himself heart and soul to art, and competent critics, I believe, agree in ranking him not only one of the first among British artists, but as one of the greatest painters of all times. Unlike Burne-Jones, Morris took his Bachelor's degree before he left Oxford, and immediately after apprenticed himself to Mr. Street, an architect in that town, thus enabling himself to keep in touch with the life of the University. His week-ends, however, he usually spent with Burne-Jones in London, and often the two were to be found with Rossetti. The company of Rossetti had great influence over him, and his doctrine at this time, that everybody should be a painter, "enforced with all the weight of his immense personality and an eloquence and plausibility in talk, which all who knew him describe as unparalleled in their experience," carried Morris for a time off his feet. He knew and thought highly of Morris's poetry, but poetry in Rossetti's mind at the time took only a second place. "If any man has poetry in him," he used to say, "he should paint, for it has all been said and written, and they have scarcely begun to paint it." The result was that, when Street removed his office to London, Morris spent all his spare hours studying with Burne-Jones, and by-and-by he gave up his architectural office

work, and devoted his whole time to study for painting.

For about two years Morris continued those studies, but it was evident to his friends that he was not at all happy in them. He was moody and irritable; he brooded much by himself, and lost for a time, his friends said, something of his old sweetness and affectionateness of manner. He was under the influence of Rossetti, and one cannot but think the cause of the irritability is to be found in the fact that he wanted vent to pronounce *himself*. He was too strong a personality, and too self-sufficient, to live comfortably under any other, and this I believe to be the cause of that aloofness and dryness which we cannot but detect in the connection between Rossetti and Morris.

At last Morris finally decided he could not be a painter as painters are known, and a simple circumstance or two at this time pointed distinctly towards the things he best could do, and those he pursued to the end of his life with a diligence, a splendid courage and consistency that have rarely been equalled.

One has to be swift-footed and many-headed to follow from this time the doings of William Morris. It is like telling the life of a score of men at one time, or of a score of giants, and though the elements which now go to make up his life may seem widely diverse, we shall see that they

are vigorously directed towards one definite end. To merely enumerate the books he wrote, the crafts or professions he mastered, would make an imposing list. In English poetry he made a place distinctly his own, and it is now an open secret that when Tennyson died he was the only one to whom Mr. Gladstone offered the Laureateship. His translation of the Æneid, the Odyssey, the Icelandic Sagas, and Old French Romances, are evidence as to his intimacy and grasp of languages so widely different. In conjunction with Sir Edward Burne-Jones he erected a hundred or more stained glass windows for churches as perfect in workmanship and as beautiful and lofty in art as any specimens of the ancients. He revived mural tapestry in this country, and of this work, done also in conjunction with Sir Edward Burne-Jones, he has left us several pieces which, I believe, for beauty of design and colour will yet be reckoned as perhaps the finest specimens of art-fabric in the world. He introduced the oriental method of carpet weaving and embroidery, made new and highly valuable departures in ceramic art, wall-paper manufacturing, chintz printing on calico and linen, jacquard silks and tapestries, while for those he made his own drawings and at first dyed all his own yarns, an employment that afforded him the greatest delight. He has penned illuminated manuscripts the most beautiful since

the thirteenth century, and for those wonderful books of his which came from the Kelmscott press he designed his own types, and in many cases made his own woodcuts both of type and illustrations, with the result that connoisseurs pronounce them as certainly the most beautiful books ever printed in any country. At an early age he had been the means of the formation of a society for the protection of Ancient Buildings, was its chief power all through his life, and really acted the rôle of a sort of Lord-Protector of Ancient Buildings from Rome to Edinburgh. And through all this he loomed as the great power of the Socialistic movement in England, a movement having for its aim no less an object than the re-constitution of the civilized life of mankind.—A "jack-of-all-trades" with a vengeance, you will say, but he did not complete the proverb by being "master of none," for it was the great feature of William Morris that whatever he touched he had to master. And you must not consider that he merely directed those things, for he was not content till he knew and could do the actual craft with the best workman—"there was a pleasure," he used to say, "even in the drudgery of a thing one loves." Thus he not only designed his own patterns for chintzes or carpets, but would draft them himself in many cases, and cut the blocks and finger the stitches. The same man whom you

might find at night creating those wonderful romantic epics, or whom you might find of an evening lecturing to the learned heads of Oxford, the same you would find next day up to the elbows in an indigo dye-vat enjoying the work and actual contact with material things, and as jubilant when his vat turned out a success as with the proper turning of his verse.

And amid all this industry and interest he had time to spend a beautiful home life. His friends always found him ready for enjoyment, and it was a wonder to them how he found time to produce the enormous volume of work. Some of the finest peeps we get of him are with his family or party boating to or from Kelmscott Manor, his favourite old home on the upper reaches of the Thames. Morris was, of course, the life of the party, and his favourite amusement on these excursions was to act as cook, with coat off and shirt sleeves up, for he must always be working. A capital meal he made them, and when the boat was anchored and the spread made on the river bank, the cook would sauce his dishes with romances of his own creation, or rehearse, perhaps, one of his favourite Northern Sagas. The joy he had in his home, especially in that old manor in the country, with its garden of old-fashioned flowers and clipped trees, the birds and quaint country life all around, is delightful to think of.

We have already hinted that a very simple incident changed Morris from pursuing the painter's art to that of the manufacturer's or decorator's. The rooms which he and Burne-Jones took in Red Lion Square were unfurnished. He therefore set himself abroad in London to procure suitable furniture and other fitments, and the mass of positively ugly things he saw, and the utter lack of anything approaching to his ideal of the beautiful, made him resolve to create his things for himself. He had been living hitherto in a sort of mediæval atmosphere of his own, scarcely knowing what was around him, and it was only when he was brought into actual touch with things and had actual needs, that the contrast between his dream of beauty and the world of reality was forced upon him. This dearth of things beautiful led to the clubbing together of a few of the old Oxford set, and one or two others, with the ideal before them of making the English home once more a place of beauty. Under the name of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co. they issued a circular announcing themselves as fine art workmen in painting, carving, furniture, and the metals, stating bold opinions on the subject of decorative art. Besides five others the company included such men as Morris, Burne-Jones, and Rossetti, and though work was done by several others for many years, especially by Burne-Jones, who con-

tinued to design for Morris to the very end of his life, the whole directing and chief bulk of the actual work fell upon Morris, and the firm was ultimately, and is now, known as Morris & Co. Their "prentice han's" they tried on a house for Morris himself, for about this time he had married the beautiful Jane Burden of Oxford, and the labour and love spent by the friends on the Red House at Upton makes now most interesting history, and was the nucleus of what turned out to be a complete revolution in the architectural and decorative arts of England, and even of Europe. From this time Morris threw himself heart and soul into the crafts. The psychological or social side of work or the workers did not then bulk largely on his view. Pure and wholesome delight in actual work, in the creating of beautiful things, completely absorbed him, but this experience of delight in creative energy formed an important part of his teaching in after years. It is impossible to follow in detail the various crafts and occupations we find Morris engaged in, but the same element runs through all, and the same spirit attacked each and all in a similar way. Whether he was making a stained-glass window, a carpet, or a book, the first requirement he made was that the foundation materials should be of the soundest. The glass must be properly fired, the dyes fast, and the vellum

and ink durable, else what was the use, he argued, of his working beautiful art upon them. And with what skill and patience he must have struggled for the sound materials, those of us who know a little of such things can appreciate, from the practically perfect texture which he in every case attained. We hear of him making his own kilns because he could not get his glass fired properly elsewhere; we hear of him prying into old French dye books to discover how a certain colour was to be dyed of which the art had been lost, and every piece of work he made or directed he put together as an ancient builder with stone and sound lime, meaning it to stand the test of ages. Having arrived at proper structure and foundation, he now revelled in the beauty he wished to lay upon it. Morris was a born decorator, one, that is, who can decorate a plain surface with pleasing and interesting beauty, and it seemed to stream out of him like natural springs. I often remember Burne-Jones's phrase of him when I look at his designs, "Talked incessantly for seven hours or longer;" there is the same unstinted and wholesome liberality. Mr. Ruskin has said that art in decoration may appeal in two ways, by its simple severity or its wonderful copiousness, and of those he said that "No architecture is so haughty as that which is simple, which refuses to address the eye except in a few clear and forceful lines,

which implies, in offering so little to our regard, that all it has offered is perfect, and disdains either by complicacy or attractiveness of its features to embarrass our investigation or betray us into delight." Morris was not of this class. There was none of that haughtiness of perfection, if we like so to read it; there was no niggardliness or barrenness, but magnificent and copious enthusiasm in everything he designed. He seemed to love the thing so he scarcely could let it go, and kept adding creation upon creation and interest upon interest till the work was literally alive with beauty and entertainment, like the wonderful fretworks of a Gothic cathedral.

One may ask, what was the distinctive feature of this new art to make its advent so remarkable? What was there different in it from that already existing? The difference was one almost as between life and death. Under the confusion of commercialism, Art had slumbered heavily for several hundred years. It was not more than twenty years before that she had been uncovered and gently breathed upon by John Ruskin, and this utterance was almost the first sign of returning life. (It may be well to say here, and it is a fact which Morris gladly acknowledged, that whatever his life afterwards, there is no doubt the keynote was found in youth in the trenchant essays of John Ruskin, and perhaps the chapter on

Gothic Architecture in "The Stones of Venice" may be taken as the text on which Morris's whole practical life was built.) The art of Morris was, in short, a return to Nature, for in this simple fact lay all its newness and force. At that time, in the late fifties, all that could be offered was either coarsely utilitarian, or was a conglomeration of that utterly meaningless ornament which was the product of the Courts of France, and which showed in every curve traces of the flippant artificial life of those quarters. It was as if a child, ruddy and glowing with Nature's own blood, had been thrust among them to shame the miserably painted contortions and affectations. In short, the advent of Morris did for architecture and decorative art what Burns and Wordsworth and Keats had done for poetry, and the mechanical and artificial structures of two centuries had to fall before a simple appeal to Nature. I do not know whether it has been the lot of many of you to work among the art which came from those French Courts, and which was the authorized and orthodox till a very recent date, and is so for many even now, but I can speak from experience of its utter incompetence to interest or please the mind. All is meaningless and tawdry beyond toleration. There is no structure, no suggestiveness of anything noble or interesting beyond. In the new art, on the other hand, there was the freshness and vigour

of the outer air, a suggestiveness of green meadow and many-coloured flowers, of waving trees and singing birds, and of as much beyond as one had power to read. It was therefore full of endless life and pleasure, because capable of variety as wide and beautiful as Nature herself. And it was no mere photographic or pictorial treatment of natural objects. The extent and manner of what is called the conventionalism depended on the nature of the surface to be decorated, but it was always sympathetic and intelligent, showing that the artist loved the subjects he was handling, and his representation of plant, bird, or it might be of the human figure itself, was the expression of his delight, and was his interpretation of what he saw in them of outward as well as of inward beauty. The distribution and grouping of ornament, what is called the design, depended on the class of material, but was always such that the texture could adequately express the motive of the artist, and in return the design enhanced the merit of the texture, there being thus a thorough understanding or marrying between the two. This struck the true note of successful decoration, and it is most interesting to observe throughout Morris's work how faithfully he has followed this rule, and how eminently successful the result invariably is. Thus, for his wall-paper hangings, a texture which is used stretched out flat, and where the

design is executed by mechanical process, he makes the natural forms more conventional, and, as he says, creates due paper-stainers' flowers and leaves, forms that are obviously fit for printing with the block; while, on the other hand, the special qualities needful for a good design for woven stuff are, in his own words, "breadth and boldness, ingenuity and closeness of invention, clear definite detail joined to intricacy of parts, and finally a distinct appeal to the imagination or skilful suggestion of delightful pieces of nature."

And coupled with this gift of prolific creation in design was that of being a born colourist. There is perhaps as much of the charm of his art due to his colourings as to the drawings; indeed, the colour scheme cannot be considered as separate from the general design. Morris was fond of calling himself an "idle dreamer of dreams," and one is apt to associate a certain haziness or grayness of colour effect with a dreamy nature, but there was none of this in Morris's work. The chief characteristic of his colouring, on the contrary, is its intense purity and decisiveness of tone, yet with a quality that makes the ensemble often full of mystery and suggestiveness. There was nothing he hated more than muddy colouring, and once he offended a noble client who insisted on getting those "nice, soft colourings," by telling him rather heatedly that "if

he wanted dirt there was lots of it in the street."

Where there is so much to choose from, it is difficult to single out for special mention. There was as much of Morris's creative genius shown in those simple repeat patterns for chintzes or painted tiles as in his larger works, but he doubtless himself attached more importance to those larger creations which he intended to be of permanent historic interest. Of such were the stained-glass windows which he did in conjunction with Sir Edward Burne-Jones, among the finest of which three are to be seen at Christ Church, Oxford, and the large mural tapestries, in which Burne-Jones also invariably did the drawing for the figures, while Morris did the general design and the colouring. Of the latter, the largest, and perhaps the most important, were the panels which were done towards the end of Morris's life for Stanmore Hall—illustrative of the Arthurian romances, or more particularly of that part of the legend which deals with "The Quest of the San-Graal." The main piece consists of a series of figure-subject panels eight feet high, and the set took nearly four years to complete. All the best qualities of Morris's art are represented in these great efforts—the sound, bold texture, the infinite variety and suggestiveness in design, and the altogether exquisite colouring, so fresh and vivid and full of bloom.

And his poetry had the same characteristics as his other arts. Indeed, he did not regard it as different from any of the others, and once in a hot talk, when poetry was under discussion, he remarked that "that talk of inspiration is sheer nonsense; there is no such thing: it is a mere matter of craftsmanship." And in the poems one can detect the same quality of workmanship, the same variety and beauty of incident, the same interest in detail, the same grouping and building together into a beautiful whole. Just as he would make his design for a chintz different from that for a carpet, so he made his design for poetry such as only a poetic texture could express. His poems are not mere word-pictures or painted poems, but they contain a subtlety of thought and imagination, and a sense of continuous incident such as narrative poetry alone can express. And just as he would diffuse the interest and incident equally over a pattern or panel, so he did in his poetry. There are no bursts of supreme inspiration, no great climax to which all is sacrificed or subservient, for one is carried leisurely and happily amid continuous beauties by this "Idle Singer of an empty day." That is why there have been so few lines quoted of Morris's poetry, and why there are so few quotable, the "dramatic and emotional interest are diffused so equally throughout." His wonderful admiration for the Icelandic Sagas comes out most strongly in

his poetry, and in those he found perhaps the foundation for his greatest poetic works. "The Volsunga Saga," his biographer says, "had for long seemed to him almost too great a story to be re-told, and too perfectly set forth in the Icelandic prose of the twelfth century to gain or not to lose from fresh handling." "This Great Story of the North," he had himself written, "should be to all our race what the Tale of Troy was to the Greeks. To all our race first, and afterwards when the change of the world has made our race nothing more than a name of what has been, a story too then should it be to those that come after us no less than the Tale of Troy has been to us." Before he could allow himself to attempt this great work he visited twice the lands of the northern mythologists, and it is striking to find the fascination those gray and barren regions had for one who loved so much the fullness and fertility of the south. But those strange lands were the home of his northern heroes, and he ultimately wove them into "The Story of Sigurd the Volsung," an epic as powerful perhaps as ever came from the hand of poet. I do not pretend to sufficient learning to enable me to put this production in balance with the great World Epics, but Mr. Mackail affirms that "the main story, as it is told in the three last books of the poem, is undoubtedly unsurpassed in the world for dignity, grandeur, and tragic tension, and in his

version the most Homeric poem which has been written since Homer. Morris felt that he had given it no inadequate treatment. It is a story at once deeply searching into human nature and more universal in its view of human life than that of either the Iliad or the Odyssey."

But the latest craft which Morris turned his genius upon, and one in which he spent as much real effort and pleasure as in any, was the printing of books. One of his earliest occupations had been the writing of illuminated manuscripts with letters and ornaments of his own, and it was in this capacity that his great gift as a designer first revealed itself to him. The specimens shown at the recent Arts and Crafts Exhibition are marvels of delicacy and beauty of penmanship. And it had been a lifelong dream of his to print books that should be as beautiful and interesting as printing could make them. So, late in life, he set to work, designed all his own letter-types, made ornamental borders and initials, and in conjunction with Sir Edward Burne-Jones many wonderful illustrations. To know how thorough and painstaking Morris was in all matters, one has only to read the history attached to these Kelmscott types. Mr. Vallance explains that, "having compared and analyzed the various founts of type from all the best sources until he had mastered the underlying principles that constitute the beauty of every letter of the alphabet, Morris began to

fashion his own type. Each single letter he designed by his own hand, on a larger scale first, lest any blemish of line or proportion might escape notice in little. He then had them reduced by photography to the required working size, and again submitted to him for final revision before being handed to the type-cutter. Two distinct types he designed in this way in upper and lower cases, the "Golden" or Roman and the "Troy," made also in a smaller size for his great "Chaucer" book, the latter two of which were Gothic in character. Then the spacing and distribution of the type, what he called the architecture of the book, had as much care." One might think all this minute attention and labour over the beautifying of a book to be useless, as not adding to the value of the subject-matter (for remember Morris would have had all books whatever printed in this beautiful and careful way), but it was all in a piece with his high sense of beauty and of its power on the human mind, and just as music or worship conducted in a building of beautiful proportions is heightened and intensified thereby, so thought of any kind is enhanced by being presented in a form which pleases and gratifies the sense of beauty at every turn.

It had been Morris's custom in commencing a new craft always to trace it back to the time when it had been produced in its highest per-

fection, to make a thorough study of the specimens of those times, and make his art grow from that point. It was a most remarkable fact, and one which must have become evident as we have proceeded, that this custom invariably led him back to his favourite Middle Ages, so much so, that in literature, as well as in the manual crafts, he seemed throughout his life as one "striving to take up and continue the dropped threads of the mediæval tradition." Ruskin before him, in his search for the truthful in art, had landed himself among the monuments of the same period—those Gothic buildings with their wonderful achievements in stone, wood, and the metals. For any specimen of real beauty it seemed compulsory to pass over in silence the past few hundred years, the present period included. But this barrenness of their own times in the production of beautiful things caused grave questions to arise in their minds, for was not art "the expression of man's pleasure in work," and did not this poverty in art therefore bespeak pleasureless life among the workers of their own day? Morris, as we have seen, had lived in the atmosphere of the Middle Ages from his very infancy, and he seemed to know, as if they had been his own mates, those serfs of the feudal times, who, as we have seen, knocked through life merrily, and made their work a toil of pleasure. That he did not meet this sort of workman when he awoke as a

young man from his mediæval dream, we also know, for were not the Reformers just at the time extracting those factory acts from parliament, and did not all economists, from Adam Smith downward, assume as a first principle "the repulsiveness of all labour." It was this impression, intensified as his life advanced, on the one hand by the keen delight which the handicrafts afforded himself, and on the other by the sight of the pleasureless living around him, which developed into those socialistic opinions with which the name of Morris has now become so widely associated. A few sentences of an address delivered in 1882 define well his position at this juncture: "As I sit at my window at home, which is at Hammersmith, close to the river, I often hear some of the ruffianism go past the window, of which a good deal has been said in the papers of late, and has been said before at recurring periods. As I hear the yells and shrieks, and all the degradation cast on the glorious tongue of Shakespeare and Milton, as I see the brutal reckless faces go past me, it rouses the recklessness and brutality in me also, and fierce wrath takes possession of me, till I remember, as I hope I mostly do, that it was my good luck only of being born respectable and rich that has put me on this side of the window among delightful books and lovely works of art, and not on the other side, in the empty

street, the drink-steeped liquor-shops, the foul and degraded lodgings. I know by my own feelings and desires what these men want, what would have saved them from this lowest depth of savagery,—employment which would foster their self-respect and win the praise and sympathy of their fellows, and dwellings which they would come to with pleasure, surroundings which would soothe and elevate them; reasonable labour, reasonable rest. There is only one thing that can give this—art."

Now it is not to be assumed that men like Ruskin and Morris, because of their love for art, condemned *in toto* the vast mechanical inventions and institutions which are the growth of modern times. They did not believe that God died with the Middle Ages, and had no desire to turn back the clock five hundred years. Morris was too shrewd not to appreciate the light that shone from the Revival of Learning, or the miraculous expanse that followed in the train of commercialism. But what he pertinently asked was whether in this activity and passion for the mastery of material things there was not something that had been left behind, some simple charm of life perhaps which the people of a past century could teach the nineteenth. This was the plea which Morris put forth, and which, considered in its fullest aspect, was really his message to

the world. Viewing life from his mediæval study he had recognized that the parting of the old and new world commenced when those Craft Guilds withdrew to the towns, and when they began to make things *to sell* instead of *to use*. This destroyed, he perceived, the completeness and independence of the craftsman, and at the same time created a vast new class of mere labourers. He recognized that the inevitable result of this was the decadence of art in everyday life. But a new hope dawned with the first glimpse of those labour-saving inventions whereby the "hewing of wood" and "drawing of water" were to be relegated to strong machines, and workers thus freed for other developments. But when he came from his study into the actual world he was amazed, for though he found those labour-saving machines brought to the very acme of perfection, so that a few hours' work per week would suffice for the drudgery of a life, he found that the vast majority of the people spent the whole hours of the day and the whole energy of their lives at the dullest mechanical toil, and that that freedom of life in which alone the arts could thrive, was as far away as could well be imagined. That is what enraged him, that is what made him a socialist. The Genius of Invention, he said, had done nobly in bringing to man's service the powerful forces of nature, but the world wanted now the Genius of Dis-

tribution, whereby those new gifts should be properly apportioned, and the whole of mankind derive due advantage. To work at "Crafts and Arts" was his greatest delight, but his ideal was an art which could be shared by all, because expressive of the joy of all. No art of this kind was possible, he perceived, under the present condition of life, so with one heave he threw up everything for the clearing of the ground and the attainment of the *larger purpose*. To this work he abandoned himself heart and soul, and, whether one agrees with his creed or not, no one but must admire the courage and unselfishness which made him come from the snugness of his study or workshop into that rough work and trying atmosphere which are inseparable from a socialistic crusade. He estranged many friends, but he was convinced of the rightness of his principles, and, from being an ordinary member of the Democratic Federation and Socialistic League, he grew to be their president and chief power as well as principal contributor to their journal, "The Commonweal." He was fifty years of age before he cast his coat to the toilsome work, this born aristocrat, this "Idle Singer of empty days," this lover of the æsthetic. Yet for the next ten years he threw himself into the movement with all the ardour and passion of youth. He lectured outdoors and indoors to crowded and heated mobs, sometimes to a cold and

callous few, but he persisted magnificently, and to the end was full of confidence in the final triumph of his principles. He worked under the influence of a great hope, and in those few years put forth more strenuous and concentrated effort than he had done in any years before. It had meant no sudden change of principle when he openly avowed socialism, but the work forced itself upon him now as a *primary duty*, and he worked with a singleness, a devotedness and impetuousness that were exceptional as they were admirable in a man going towards his sixties. Perhaps, as his biographer says, in his great anxiety for the accomplishment of his ends, his energy had become forced and feverish, and, as Morris himself beautifully explains, "it was the power of the strong man yearning to accomplish something before his death, not the simple hope of a child who has long years of life and growth before him." The road to him seemed so simple and straight, and the end so desirable. His aim here, as in all the previous efforts of his life, was towards the attainment of the beautiful. He loved the life of the Middle Ages because it bespoke everywhere beauty in surroundings and pleasure in work. The long crisis in those centuries of commercialism he valued as necessary to the attainment of definite ends, but now that those ends had been attained or perhaps over-reached, when a century of

mechanical ingenuity had so multiplied the productive and reaping power of the world, it was urgent, he claimed, that the benefits of those inventions should be spread abroad; and that the working classes, or all classes for that matter, should be freed from anxiety over bare necessities, and afforded that leisure in their lives which is the logical sequence to a century of labour-saving inventions. In that leisure lay all his hopes. He had faith that the springs of art in the human mind are deathless, and had hopes that when man should be released from the long hours of forced toil he would rear up around him a world as beautiful as any that had been. He would again know the freshness and vigour of an outside life, the positive pleasure in the creating of beautiful things with his hands, and around him would rise an art to express that pleasure, as had risen around those mediæval serfs. But, as mediæval art even at its best bore indications of the ignorance, the superstition, and the rudeness of the times, so this new art Morris hoped would be expressive of that wider horizon, that fuller knowledge and freer life which had been the growth of the intervening centuries,—the best and broadest art, because expressive of the highest life the world had yet known.

The coming of this day Morris saw through the avenue of socialism, and for this he fought with all the strength of his later days. For a

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